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December 2002

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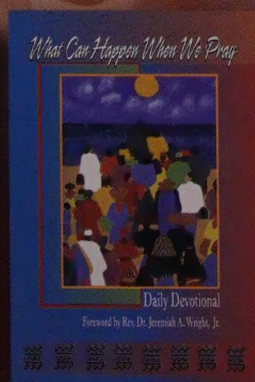


Women of Faith . . .

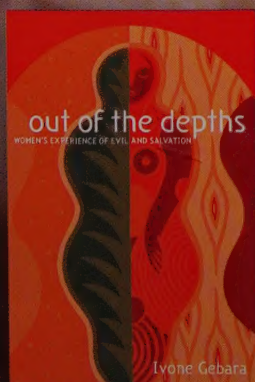
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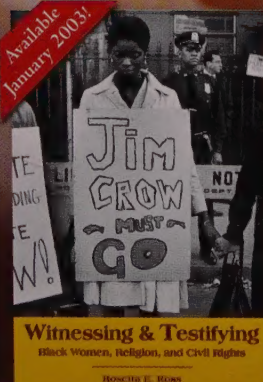
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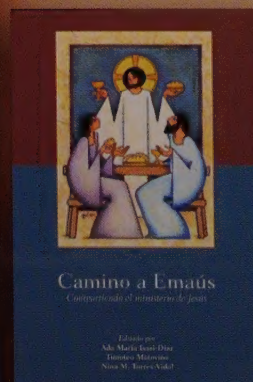
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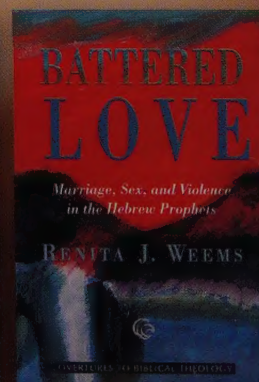
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Augsburg Fortress



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Praying through Advent Karen Ball

How is your group involved with service projects or organizing volunteering opportunities to celebrate the spirit of the Christmas season?

Daily Blessings Dana Vance Colby

In efforts to be all-embracing, have you celebrated other traditions at Christmas or on other holidays?

Session 4: Grace upon Grace Every Christmas, we celebrate the gift of the Word made flesh. John begins his Gospel by speaking of the Word who was present with God at the very beginning of creation. That eternal Word, John announces, has become a human being in the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Eventually, the church would hear in the prologue to John's Gospel (John 1:1-18) a testimony that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. In this session, we study the opening verses of John's Gospel, read closely the poetry of these lines of Scripture, and consider how Jesus has made God known to us. *Mary Hinkle*

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This month's question: When I converse with God in prayer, I often imagine God to be . . . And your answers to the previous question on how we volunteer.

A poem for the season. *Shirley Schroeder*

Because there is no other system in place, unaccompanied children who flee to the United States wind up in jail, housed with juvenile and even adult offenders. *Elizabeth Senft*

Women of the ELCA supports Project Lifeline: An update on the progress of this important and much-needed program. *Doris Strieter*

Valuable information for every reader.

After attending the Triennial in Philadelphia and reading the July/August (2002) issue of *Lutheran Woman Today*, I have been writing a letter in my mind to my congressperson regarding the United States' sacrificing children for the sake of a tax cut for the wealthy, for the sake of bad foreign policy, for the sake of stocking the "company store" over feeding the hungry.

The article "Interview with an Advocate" left me with a scared feeling in the pit of my stomach. There is so much to do. And it is so important to be an advocate. What can my letters do? I guess I'll have to write and find out. Please pray for me. I'm a fish out of water, but I really feel the call.

Thank you.

Edith M. Pavone—Joppa, Md.

Dear Edith and others who have heard the call, Thank you for sharing your thoughts and concerns with us regarding becoming an advocate. We realize that at times it may seem that putting pen to paper is an insignificant act. We might think, "How can this one letter possibly make a difference?" When we think of the letter or phone call as one action alone and by itself, it may indeed seem that way. We all know that one snowflake falling silently to the earth hardly makes a snowstorm. However, when that snowflake comes together with others, collectively they can make quite an impact. History shows us all too well what happens if we keep silent when justice is not being served or when some seek to oppress others. Put yourself in the shoes of those being abused, neglected, or mistreated. A letter may not be the only thing


that is needed, but it just might be the snowflake that gets things going—the eds.

How can I thank you for the article by Herb Chilstrom in the latest issue of *LWT* (September 2002)! In our family we struggle with mental illnesses and are usually on a roller-coaster ride, from one end of the family to the other—in other words, there is not a final chapter to this roller-coaster, up-and-down struggle. Former bishop Chilstrom really spoke to my spirit today, reminding me that others out there *know* battle. I wish to publish the last two paragraphs in our bulletin on Sunday because it is a fitting postscript to last Sunday's sermon on Jesus grabbing Peter (grabbing us) and saving us from perishing in the chaos of the deep. "This world is a dangerous place"—thank you so much for publishing such a wonderfully self-disclosing witness! Thanks for a great magazine!

David L. Isaacson, Pastor

Dear Pastor Isaacson,

Thanks for the affirmation. We'd like to take this opportunity to encourage all readers to look at the last page of any issue of LWT. This page holds a wealth of information for subscribers who need reprint permission, copyright information, or subscription assistance, as well as Braille and audiotope info. Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, in Minneapolis, handles all these aspects, and the phone numbers, email addresses, and postal addresses are listed on that page. Please contact the folks at AFP whenever you need assistance in these areas. Thanks—the eds.



G I V E U S T H I S D A Y

The Hopes and Fears of All the Years

by Marj Leegard

BETHLEHEM. TINY SILENT VILLAGE OF SONG, OR BESIEGED, BATTERED CENTER OF WAR? PEACE ON EARTH? WE LONG FOR THAT HILL WITH RESTING SHEEP AND SHEPHERDS READY TO WATCH THROUGH THE NIGHT. WE WANT TO SEE THE MIRACLE OF GOD IN human form in a baby sheltered in a manger. We want to be there and experience Christmas again. The way it was. And Christmas seems never to be the same as it was. Not even as fine as last year.

A little porcelain village depicting life at the turn of the century (no, not 2000 but 1900) sets the scene. Few of the decorations on the tree are the latest style and color. The twigs are covered with the green*and gold, the satin and chenille of years gone by. Of childhood long past. While we are making the Christmas of our memory, our children and grandchildren are absorbing now the foundation of memories Christmas will hold for them.

Mary, Joseph, the angels, the shepherds, the very straw in the barn that served as a birthing place, the taxation policies—all were there that first Christmas. Even the star moving across the heavens toward Judea was part of the story. We can hardly separate all of life from the birth at Bethlehem.

Could it be that vanilla and sugar and butter culminating in Ooma's sugar cookies are not an intrusion but part of the story, too? And that Grandpa's thin *lefse*, buttered and lightly sprinkled with sugar, belongs in the narrative, too?

God began the story in the world as it is.

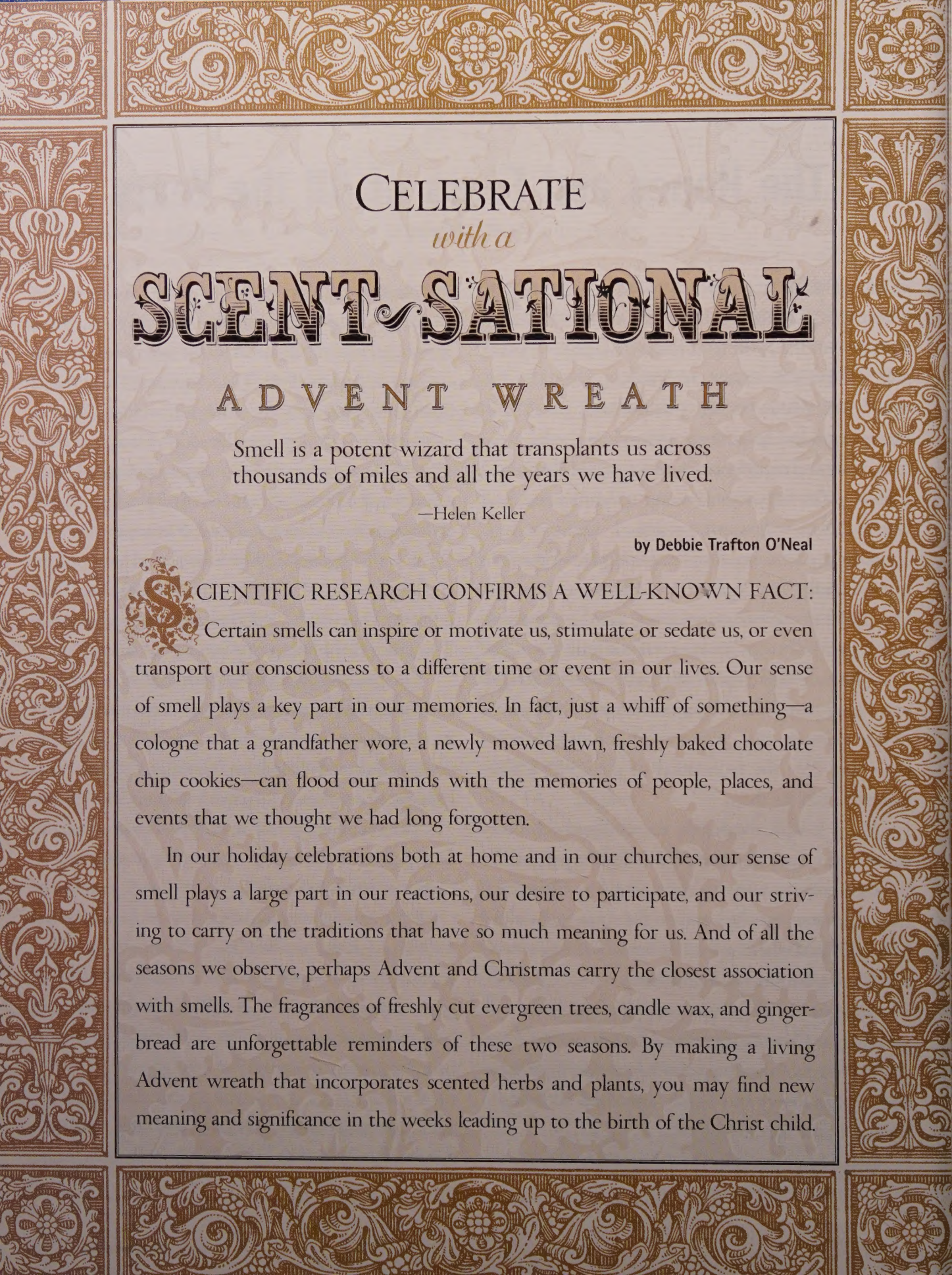
There was a time when we could look at the turmoil in the world from a distance. Even Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, seemed distant to us on the mainland. Now we are part of the battlefield. The front lines. The physical place of carnage and death and pain and fear. We live in a battlefield of ideas, too. Freedom. Government by all or by those with privilege and power. A people who respect each other or a people who subject women and children to less than personhood. We want to cry out, "Why can't Christmas be the way it used to be? Clean and pure and holy?" And then the answer comes. This is the world in which God's love and grace are present. This is the Bethlehem world our Savior entered.

The promise of peace on earth lives in the prayers and the actions of people who have heard God's promise. "Unto you is born a Savior" happens again when your faith provides food for the hungry. "Unto you" happens when you visit someone longing for a friend.

The shepherds could hardly wait to get from the lonely pasture to a place where people gathered so they could tell the story.

From our Christmas trees, *lefse* sticks, and *krum kaker* irons, from our families gathered at our tables, from the warmth and joy of our Sunday school programs, may we hasten to tell the story. We have seen Christmas again. The Christmas of God's promise. Peace on earth!

LWT columnist Marj Leegard and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.



CELEBRATE *with a* SCENT-SATIONAL

A D V E N T W R E A T H

Smell is a potent wizard that transplants us across
thousands of miles and all the years we have lived.

—Helen Keller

by Debbie Trafton O'Neal

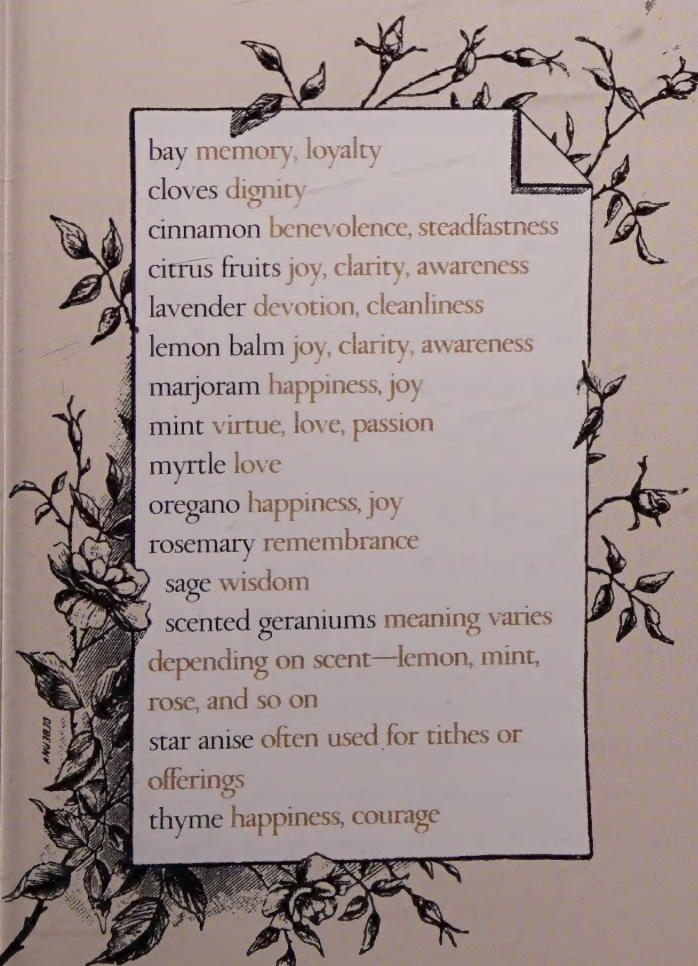
SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH CONFIRMS A WELL-KNOWN FACT: Certain smells can inspire or motivate us, stimulate or sedate us, or even transport our consciousness to a different time or event in our lives. Our sense of smell plays a key part in our memories. In fact, just a whiff of something—a cologne that a grandfather wore, a newly mowed lawn, freshly baked chocolate chip cookies—can flood our minds with the memories of people, places, and events that we thought we had long forgotten.

In our holiday celebrations both at home and in our churches, our sense of smell plays a large part in our reactions, our desire to participate, and our striving to carry on the traditions that have so much meaning for us. And of all the seasons we observe, perhaps Advent and Christmas carry the closest association with smells. The fragrances of freshly cut evergreen trees, candle wax, and gingerbread are unforgettable reminders of these two seasons. By making a living Advent wreath that incorporates scented herbs and plants, you may find new meaning and significance in the weeks leading up to the birth of the Christ child.

THE LANGUAGE OF HERBS

Herbs have been part of people's lives since time began. Throughout the Bible and in other ancient writings, there are hundreds of references to the herbs people used in their daily lives, for special events, and for religious ceremonies. Herbs, often called "the useful plants," are employed for culinary and medicinal purposes, as well as for their beauty and fragrance. Some of the herbs mentioned in the Bible are nard or spikenard (lavender), "bitter herbs" (such as lettuce, endive, and watercress), myrtle, anise, balm, cinnamon, coriander, cumin, garlic, hyssop, and mint.

When you know the traditional meanings of herbs, you can craft a message in your wreath with the herbs you choose. Your choice of herbs can create a theme for your Advent season and devotional time. Here are some well-known herbs that would work well in a living Advent wreath, along with their traditional meanings:



bay memory, loyalty
cloves dignity
cinnamon benevolence, steadfastness
citrus fruits joy, clarity, awareness
lavender devotion, cleanliness
lemon balm joy, clarity, awareness
marjoram happiness, joy
mint virtue, love, passion
myrtle love
oregano happiness, joy
rosemary remembrance
sage wisdom
scented geraniums meaning varies
depending on scent—lemon, mint,
rose, and so on
star anise often used for tithes or
offerings
thyme happiness, courage

Note: Cinnamon, citrus fruits, cloves, and star anise are not usually available as potted herbs, but cinnamon sticks, citrus peels cut into star shapes or curled into strips, dried cloves, and star anise are lovely embellishments for the living wreath.

MAKE A LIVING ADVENT WREATH

As you make the wreath, think about the gift of Jesus and the presence of God in your life. Included in the directions below are some thoughts to lend a devotional focus to your work. Keep the completed wreath on a dining table or in another central place throughout the season of Advent, using the weekly devotional suggestions here, or others that you like. After Christmas, plant your herbs in a greenhouse, or once the danger of frost has passed, outside in the garden.

MATERIALS NEEDED:

- 1 aluminum or copper ring pan, the kind used for a ring cake or gelatin mold (often available in the cooking utensil department or at a thrift store or garage sale)
- spray paint, if desired
- hammer and nail
- block of scrap wood
- potting soil
- your choice of potted herbs from the list at left (or any other herbs that you like)
- 4 small terra cotta flowerpots to use as candleholders
- 4 white candles
- floral foam
- ribbon, raffia, or twine to tie around the pan
- small pair of scissors
- a tray or plate to set the wreath on

A ring or circle is the traditional shape for a wreath. The circle represents the completeness of life and the eternal life that we can claim as children of God.



Make sure that the ring pan is clean and dry; then position it on the block of wood and pound a few nail holes into the bottom for drainage. If you want to change its color, take it outside and use the spray paint. When the paint is dry, fill the pan about two-thirds full with potting soil.

Before choosing the herbs or plants you'll use, read through the list on page 7. (You may have to go to a health food store for herb plants). What theme or focus would you like this Advent season to have for you and for your family? Choose herbs with the traditional meanings that fit this focus. Think about whether you want to use the herbs for other purposes. Do you plan to snip the herbs for use in cooking or just enjoy their fragrance?

It is traditional to light four candles during the season of Advent, one per Sunday. This is a way of counting the weeks until Christmas Day. Candles are symbols of light in the darkness of our winter world. Think about how you will do this in your wreath. Will you place all four candles in the wreath at the beginning of Advent, or will you want to leave space to add a candle each Sunday?

Arrange your potted herbs atop the potting soil in the ring to create a pleasing pattern, keeping contrasting textures in mind. For example, instead of grouping all the spiky herbs together, intermingle them with softer, rounder shapes.

Determine where the terra cotta candleholders will go among the herbs. To guarantee that your candles

will fit firmly in the pots, cut floral foam slightly larger than the bottom of the pots, press the foam into the pots, and then press and twist the candles firmly into the foam.

Now remove the herbs from their pots and add them to your ring pan, tamping more soil around them to keep them in place and topping off the soil level. Good soil can make all the difference for the plants that you choose to grow. Without the correct soil, plants can wither and die. In the same way, we need to stay grounded in God's word and in fellowship with other Christians so that we do not wither and die.

Set the living wreath on a round tray or plate; then water gently. Tie a piece of ribbon, raffia, or length of twine around the wreath if you like. If you would like to snip the herbs for cooking during Advent, tie a length of ribbon, raffia, or twine to a small pair of scissors and attach the scissors to the wreath. Just as herbs can season the food we eat, color our days, and fill the rooms of our house with sweet smells, loving others and sharing the good news with them can fill our lives with joy!

A SIMPLE VARIATION

An even simpler variation of this wreath can be made with four white pillar candles, fresh bunches of four different kinds of herbs, and wire, ribbon, raffia, or twine. You may choose to prepare the four candles at the same time or prepare one per week as part of your devotional time.

Debbie Trafton O'Neal is an author, educator, and consultant for families and children. Her latest book is *The Family Hand-Me-Down Book: Creating and Preserving Family Traditions* (Augsburg Fortress, Publishers).

WEEK BY WEEK ADVENT REFLECTIONS

First Sunday in the flesh (birth) Rosemary

Think about Mary, the mother of Jesus. How did Mary prepare for the birth of Jesus? If you are a mother, how did you prepare for the birth of your first child? According to one legend, rosemary got its name and blue flowers from Mary. When Mary needed a place to dry the swaddling cloths, she hung them on a rosemary bush.

Second Sunday in mind Sage

Sage is traditionally known as the herb of wisdom. In fact, we call a wise person a sage. Is there someone you admire for his or her devout faith? What can you learn from this person about how to live a life of faith in today's world?

Third Sunday in death Bay

The bay leaf is known as an herb of nobility, memory, and loyalty. In fact, one traditional meaning of the bay leaf is "I change but in death." Although it is difficult to think about the death of Jesus during this joyous holiday season, without God's plan for Jesus' death and resurrection, we would not know everlasting life. How do you live today, knowing that your life with God is secure?

Fourth Sunday in majesty Lavender

A traditional color for royalty is purple or lavender. Lavender, a drought-tolerant herb, grows readily in the Mediterranean climate and is mentioned in the Bible, where it is called nard or spikenard. Some scholars believe that the expensive perfume that the woman used to anoint Jesus' feet was lavender perfume or oil. She honored Jesus when she did this. How do you honor Jesus in your daily life?

Praying through Advent

by Karen Ball

IN OUR FAMILY, THE HOLIDAY SEASON STARTS AT THE END OF OCTOBER. FROM THEN UNTIL THE NEW YEAR, WE SEEM TO HAVE NONSTOP ACTIVITY: HALLOWEEN AND ALL SAINTS' DAY, BIRTHDAYS, THANKSGIVING, CHRISTMAS, AND ALL THE PARTIES AND ACCOMPANYING PREPARATIONS. AND, OF COURSE, THERE'S THE SHOPPING.

Don't get me wrong; on the whole, I enjoy it. But it gets pretty hectic sometimes. And I agree with author Margaret Guenther that "excessive busyness, particularly in the service of a good cause, is an effective way of hiding from God and from our own deepest self" (*The Practice of Prayer*, p. 15).

Something I enjoy about Advent is the opportunity to pull back a bit and rest. If I am not careful, my prayer life can disappear in the doings of the day, and then I have lost any chance for facing the activities and the season with grace. This year I am praying through Advent with the help of Jane Vennard.

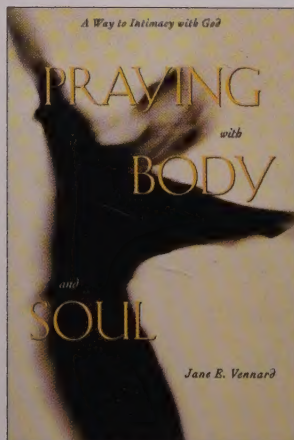
Twelve years ago I had a mastectomy followed by six months of chemotherapy. Recently I had surgery to repair a leaking blood vessel in one eye. I had a much harder time facing the potential loss of my sight than the actual loss of my breast. My spiritual director urged me to "just sit" with my anxiety, offer it up to God, and "see what happens." Because most of

my usual ways of praying didn't seem to offer me much consolation, I decided that maybe a new look at my body and my prayer life was in order.

Sitting with my hands folded and my head bowed isn't always enough. On the other hand, I'm not likely to become a liturgical dancer in the foreseeable future. So it was with some apprehension that I picked up *Praying with Body and Soul*. "She's going to try to make me comfortable with standing up and swaying in time to the music, and it's not going to happen," I thought.

Of course, Vennard doesn't try to do anything of the sort. She states that her purpose is "to help you recognize the many and varied ways you are already praying." She then gently challenges many of the notions we hold about God and prayer.

Throughout, Vennard invites the reader to explore new ways to pray—by addressing our sensuality and sexuality; through humor, laughter, and playfulness; and through work, service, justice, and care of the earth. With each chapter she includes suggestions for reflection and discussion, as well as an outline for a group study guide. If you are looking for a way to expand your idea and experience of prayer, either alone or as part of a group, this book is a wonderful place to start.



Praying with Body and Soul: A Way to Intimacy with God
by Jane E. Vennard
Augsburg Fortress,
Publishers, 1998

Questions for reflection or discussion as you read:

1. How were you taught to pray? Who taught you? What messages did you get about your body in relation to prayer? What were you taught that no longer works for you?
2. Have you ever felt betrayed by your body? What does that mean to you and to your relationship with God? How do you offer up your concerns and anxieties to God?

For Further Reading

Praying for Friends and Enemies: Intercessory Prayer, by Jane E. Vennard (Augsburg Fortress, Publishers, 1995).

We all know that Jesus calls us to pray for our enemies, but how do we do that? Vennard is never preachy; she invites the reader to begin with her deepest feelings and always be honest with God. Reflection questions and activities accompany each chapter, making this a wonderful book for individual or group study.

Learn to Pray: A Practical Guide to Faith and Inspiration, by Marcus Braybrooke (Chronicle Books, 2001).

If you have ever wondered what prayer is like for other Christians or for Hindus, Buddhists, or Muslims, this book may be what you are seeking. Or if you have a friend who is interested in exploring prayer but isn't sure she wants to belong to a church yet, this book is a good place to start. Each section is accompanied by an exercise that invites the reader to experience the form of prayer herself.

The Practice of Prayer, by Margaret Guenther (Cowley Publications, 1998).

Guenther begins with the premise that all people pray, whether they know it or not, and have a variety of prayer experiences. This book is a bit more scholarly than the others, but not at all difficult to read. The first

half focuses on the spiritual background of prayer, types and varieties of prayer, and ways to practice prayer. In the second half, Guenther gives specific examples with chapter titles like "Your kitchen will teach you everything" and "How do I pray when the baby is keeping me up?" Although not written exclusively for women, this book nonetheless recognizes the obstacles that women must sometimes overcome in order to find time for prayer. Guenther also invites us to understand how prayer and prayerfulness permeate our lives.

The Lord's Prayer, illustrated by Tim Ladwig (Eerdmans Books, 2000).

For those who sometimes struggle with the image of God as father, this is a wonderful book—and certainly not just for children. Ladwig's illustrations of a young girl spending the day with her father helping an elderly neighbor give new meaning to each phrase of Jesus' prayer. In his drawings we see the wonderful capacity of God to be our father and a hint of what that relationship might mean.

The Lively Garden Prayer Book, by William Cleary (Forest of Joy Publishing, 1997).

If you are already tired of winter, this book may help you get through the next few months. From acorns to zucchini, we get a full alphabet of plant prayers. "Broccoli's Blessing," subtitled "Differences among us can spark immense energies," was a favorite of mine, a wonderful variation on the theme of "it's not easy being green." Cleary reminds us that prayer need not always be somber and solemn and that God invites us to laugh as a part of our prayer life.

Karen Ball is a writer and spiritual director in Oakland, Calif. Her article "Peace, Justice, Prayer and the People in the Pews" appeared in the Summer 2001 issue of *Liturgy*, and she has a web site at www.e-spiritu.com.

GOD WITH US

EXPERIENCING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

by Wyvetta Bullock

Prayer, taking time to observe creation, advocacy for justice, silence, journaling, regular worship, sharing word and sacrament, and giving care and forgiveness to others are among the variety of practices for experiencing the presence of God that have made their way into Christian spirituality and literature.

In 2000, our church issued an ELCA-wide “Call to Discipleship” from the Teach the Faith Initiative for a New Century. This call suggested seven basic faith practices for our life with God and community: prayer, study, worship, evangelism, teaching or mentoring, service, and stewardship. You probably have your own list of practices that are important for your ongoing relationship with God. Certainly there are more than seven, and no one practice alone is sufficient for one’s entire faith journey.

I believe our experience of God is chiefly found in our experiences with others. I am thankful that my parents helped me understand the importance of sharing God’s presence in community and daily relationships.

EVERYDAY GIFTS

Christmas in my childhood was always a busy time. Preparing for the events and services of Christmas meant a flurry of activity. On one particular day that I recall clearly, my parents returned home from grocery shopping and filled our family room with fruits, nuts,

canned goods, and tasty treats. I could not remember seeing so many wonderful foods at one time in one place. I watched my parents fill baskets and boxes and wondered when they were going to put some of the groceries away in our kitchen cabinets. I soon discovered that the groceries were not for us, except what would be left over after each container was filled to overflowing. As each item was carefully selected and tucked inside the baskets, I could almost taste the sweetness of the oranges, hear the crack and crunch of the nuts, and feel the warmth of the tea spiced with cinnamon sticks.

My parents were preparing these baskets for some neighbors who needed them. All year long these neighbors had given us gifts of prayers, kind words, and caring presence. They were “God with us” in our everyday lives. This reciprocity acknowledged our mutual dependence. The gifts—prayers for us from them, groceries for them from us—were of different types but all given for the well-being of the other. The relationships were more important than the gifts. Mutual love and affection flowed between us.

WHETHER WE ARE AWARE OR NOT, GOD IS WITH US

At the Annunciation, Mary was alone when she experienced God's presence. The angel Gabriel told her that God had already established a relationship with her. "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." Mary's relationship with God was established by God's initiative. As Lutherans, we understand that God first came to us. Our relationship with God is first by virtue of creation, as described in the first article of the Apostles' Creed. Our covenant relationship with God is given in Jesus Christ. God is always the initiator of the relationship and remains faithful even when we are unfaithful. Like Mary, whether we are aware or not, we can be sure that God is with us.

Mary soon shared her gift of the knowledge and promise of God's presence with her cousin Elizabeth. As they shared the joy of the words they had both received, their relationship provided a place for God's presence to be more fully known. Mary's song pointed to a future where God would be present in the community and world through the child she was carrying, Jesus. Jesus later demonstrated the presence of God in community. He embraced relationships with men, women, and children. He placed God's promises in the context of the suffering and brokenness of daily life.

Our experience of God is inextricably tied to our relationships with others and creation. God took the initiative and came to us as a human being. Because God acted to reach out to us, we act to reach out to others. Our Lutheran understanding that God uses ordinary things as containers of grace gives us a means to see God with us in our relationships with one another. God's word becomes flesh in us over and over as we live daily in community.

One way I suggest we experience God with us this Christmas is by embracing the ministry of reconciliation we have received in Christ. There is a proverb

among the Xhosa people of Africa, which translated means that each individual's humanity is ideally expressed in relationship with others, or "a person depends on other people to be a person." This understanding is at the heart of Archbishop Desmond Tutu's *Ubuntu* theology. The 2003 ELCA Youth Gathering has chosen Ubuntu as its theme, translated "Do Life." I am convinced that our experience and ongoing relationship with God is found when we "do life" together. Our relationships are not perfect; we suffer brokenness and the effects of sin. The gift of the ministry of reconciliation in Christ offers forgiveness and healing with God and one another. Consider giving the gift of forgiveness this Christmas. This gift has been first given to us. We did not earn or purchase it. It needs no box or ribbons.

The gift of forgiveness was so important that Jesus came as a human being to demonstrate and ensure its power on earth. We have an opportunity in our church and community to recognize God in each other and share this gift. We are not fully who God created us to be if we are not giving to and receiving from one another. We participate with God in God's reconciling activity as we give and receive forgiveness. What better way to engage in our relationship with God than to participate in God's reconciling activity?

As I recall my childhood, we generally had good fellowship with our neighbors, but naturally there were times of misunderstanding and disappointment. One such time was when our neighbors across the street became upset when my brother married a woman of another race. Our neighbor's reaction was to place a log in the parking place we had been sharing for years. My father built another driveway for our parking needs. When he finished our new driveway, he took his tools, went across the street, and repaired our neighbor's driveway. I was angry with my father. I felt he was ignoring the insult we had suffered. That

evening, as we ate our dinner, we heard a knock at the door. When my father opened the door, our neighbor stood there with a tear-stained face. He asked us to forgive him and his family. That night our families were reconciled as we sat at table together. God's presence that night was almost palpable. The gifts we shared were confession and forgiveness.

The ministry of reconciliation is not easy. Forgiving an offense is no small matter. In *No Future without Forgiveness*, Desmond Tutu writes,

Forgiving and being reconciled are not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the pain, the degradation, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking but in the end it is worthwhile, because in the end dealing with the real situation helps to bring healing.

My father took a risk with our neighbors. There was no guarantee of how they would respond. My father did what he would have done before there was a log in the shared parking space. His act of kindness made room for reconciliation and healing in our relationship.

Recently many of us have considered more deeply the presence of God in our lives. It is difficult to think about God with us without thinking about our relationships with one another in this country and around the world.

This Christmas season, many of us will participate in community and family gatherings, worship services, and exchanges of gifts. It is not always easy to stay Christ-centered and focused on the true meaning of Christmas while trying to give attention to so many tasks. Perhaps simply acknowledging that God is already with us and that God's word continues to become flesh in us will release the peace of God in us.

As we look for God with us this season and throughout the coming year, we need look no further than a neighbor, family member, friend, or stranger. May we participate with God this Christmas by giving the gift that was first given to us. May we practice our faith daily by respecting and attending to the relationships in our lives. I am convinced that when we do this we attend to our relationship with God.

The Rev. Wyvetta Bullock is executive director of the ELCA Division for Congregational Ministries and a pastoral associate with Bethel Lutheran Church in Chicago.



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HOW IS YOUR GROUP INVOLVED WITH SERVICE PROJECTS OR ORGANIZING VOLUNTEERING OPPORTUNITIES TO CELEBRATE THE SPIRIT OF THE CHRISTMAS SEASON?

During December, we have a potluck lunch. Everyone brings baked goods and cans. We fill the cans with a variety of bakery items. We then place on the cans an address label that says, "Merry Christmas from Lyster Lutheran Church." We then deliver them to shut-ins and nursing home residents.

Gloria Brantner—Durand, Wisc.

Lyster Lutheran Church

Each year on the first Monday in December, we hold an auction. Throughout the year our women work on making craft items and recipes to auction off. Our auctioneer is very talented* and knows how to make things interesting for everybody. The money raised in the auction is divided among three local charities that we select. We usually average around \$1,800. We enjoy Christmas snacks, fun, and fellowship. We praise God with our gifts to our community.

Kathleen Mitchell—Shreveport, La.

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church

For the past eight years, Lord of Life Lutheran has hosted an annual toy drive for the students in the lower-income area of Moreno Valley. In 2001, 800 gifts, valued at approximately \$10 each, were wrapped and distributed by the young people who helped with this project. They agree this is the most gratifying part of the project. We invite other churches and groups in the community to join us. Lutheran Brotherhood and Aid Association for

Lutherans (now combined as Thrivent Financial for Lutherans) also assist. Each year, this project has been an overwhelming success. In many cases, this is the only gift the student will receive.

Carole Korshavn—Moreno Valley, Calif.

Lord of Life Lutheran Church

In November, the women of Our Saviour's hold a two-day bazaar that includes craft items, baked goods, outside vendors, lunch, and a raffle. There are plenty of places to volunteer.

All proceeds from the raffle go to our community. Last year, \$400 worth of toys were purchased. The toys are delivered to the fire hall, where other donated toys are available to parents who cannot afford to buy toys for their children. The rest is divided among several organizations. Additionally, church members are asked to donate canned goods and fresh items. Twenty or more Christmas food baskets are distributed throughout the community.

Helen Youngdahl—Lebanon, Ore.

Our Saviour's Lutheran Church

The Mary Martha circle consists of mostly retired ladies. We fill about 40 plates of cookies and goodies the second Thursday of December. The plates are then delivered to our church's elderly and shut-ins. Many recipients write to thank us and tell us that the plates are shared with friends for the holidays.

Karen Denowh—Sidney, Mont.

Pella Lutheran Church

Daily Blessings

by Dana Vance Colby

MY HUSBAND JOKES THAT OUR PARENTING PHILOSOPHY CAN BE SUMMED UP IN ONE SENTENCE: IF NO ONE IS SCREAMING OR BLEEDING, THEY MUST BE FINE. EXPECTANT AND NEW PARENTS ARE HORRIFIED WHEN I SAY THIS. EXPERIENCED PARENTS NOD KNOWINGLY, SOMETIMES ADDING THAT EVEN IF THEY ARE SCREAMING, THEY'RE PROBABLY FINE. Before I had children I, too, would have been horrified. I also had a long list of Things My Children Will Never Do, along with the accompanying list, Things I Will Never Do as a Parent.

When our first child arrived, we had an extensive Parenting Philosophy all ready to go, which I was happy to share with anyone who would listen. Now that I am a stay-at-home mom to Cameron, age 3½, and Patrick, age 1, I look back on those mental lists and cringe. How naïve I was. Three years as a parent have taught me just how little I know, and none of the things I've learned ever appeared on those lists.

When my husband and I were married seven years ago, part of our understanding of parenting was that we would accept with love the children God sent us and raise them ourselves. Being a stay-at-home mom is not always easy. Living on one salary is a challenge, and I do miss contributing to the adult professional world. Being with two small children all day is a job that requires all my inner resources—humor, patience, organization, efficiency, and love. There is no way to prepare for the amount of mental fortitude that two little ones demand. Still, I believe it is my right and my responsibility to parent my own

children. Even on my most frustrating days with them, I still do not regret my decision to stay home, not for a second. Being home with my sons is how I serve God and experience God's grace and forgiveness on a daily basis.

For a stay-at-home mom, there are many opportunities for grace and forgiveness. Every day shows me how much I need to let go of the "I will always . . ." and "My children will never . . ." lists. God has blessed me with two active, intelligent boys who challenge me continually. I am thankful every day that I am the one who has all the godly moments with my boys. When my little one cries and his brother brings him his blanket to help him feel better, I thank God for his thoughtfulness. When my older son hugs me and says, "Mommy, I love you higher enormous no matter what!" I thank God for his loving heart. When my younger son snuggles his head on my shoulder before bed or smiles so brightly when I wake him up in the morning, I thank God that I am the one to see his face. When we can spend all day in our pajamas if we like, I thank God that I am on my children's schedule, and they are not on the world's.

Even more poignant for me are the times when one of the boys struggles to accomplish something and succeeds. Almost all children eventually crawl, walk, and talk, and it is miraculous every time, but it's the smaller achievements that touch my heart. My older son has struggled mightily to control his impulses to push, hit, or otherwise torment his little brother. Lately, I have watched his face as Patrick

gets into his space and he tries so hard not to be rough with him. When he is able to control himself and ask for help instead of pushing or hitting, this is a moment of grace. When Cameron picks up his toys or brings the cups to the dinner table without my asking, just because it “helps Mommy,” this is a moment of grace.

Of course, on a good day, it is easy to believe that my boys are gifts from God. It’s the days when Patrick has emptied the dresser drawers, the bookshelves, and the entire toy box, and Cameron has thrown his blocks, had two tantrums, and sat on his little brother’s head, all before breakfast, that I really need God’s help. Then it is up to me to take a deep breath (or 10) and pray for that extra bit of patience I didn’t know I had. Often I am able to redirect a bad morning, but sometimes I do lose my temper. And then I need to ask forgiveness of my sons and God. It is in these times that my own sense of spirituality continues to grow: the days when I am not the parent I would like to be. If I am to raise kind, godly men, I need to be a kind, godly mother. When I fall short of this, I need to pray for and accept God’s forgiveness.

My husband was recently recalled to active duty in the Air Force and is now stationed out of state. Since I am alone with my boys for days at a time, it is even more important that I maintain my connection to God, both as a parent and as a wife. I pray for calmness and patience, and we all pray for Daddy’s safety and quick return.

I expect that my spirituality and parenting philosophy will continue to evolve as my children grow (although there are times when my husband’s joke is right on the money!). I do know that it would have been impossible for me to carry my children, birth them, and now watch them grow, without believing profoundly in the greatness of

God. God is with us every moment. Despite the challenges we face, I wouldn’t trade this time for anything. I thank God for the opportunities that have come to me through this parenting experience.

Dana Vance Colby, a junior high school teacher by profession, is taking time off from working to be a stay-at-home mom to her sons. She, Cameron, Patrick, and her husband, Bill, live in Chicago.

this month's QUESTION

Go to www.elca.org/wo/lwt to enter your response.
(Results will appear in the May 2003 issue)

Which of the following best completes this phrase: When I converse with God in prayer, I often imagine God to be

- A. comforting, like a parent
- B. welcoming, like a gracious host
- C. wise, like a teacher
- D. stern, like a judge
- E. regal, like a king

Results from First Question of the Month (July/August 2002)

Q: You may be involved in a number of different volunteer activities (such as helping out at a soup kitchen, visiting the homebound, etc.). When you participate in these activities, how do you do so?





THY LIGHT HAS COME

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

LUKE 2:1-20

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

MATTHEW 1:22-23



Melancholy Folly

by Shirley Schroeder

Last night I trimmed the Christmas tree
With ornaments aplenty
Some branches wore a lot of them
And some had hardly any



Just where did they all come from
These items from of old
If someone else had been there
I gladly would have told

But I was all alone last night
And since I knew each story
I reveled in each memory
Of agony and glory

Then slowly creeping in like fog
Among the tinsel and the holly
Dark and gloomy thoughts seeped in
And I was melancholy

I gave myself just so much time
To travel down that road
Before I said, "It's Jesus' birth,
The Christ, the Son of God!"

Goodbye, melancholy folly
This season truly sings
I came back to the present time
And thought on brighter things





Expect the Unexpected

Thinking Outside the (Gift) Box

by Sonia A. Albers

Surely no one would propose extending the Christmas season! Merchants already bombard us with Christmas merchandise and advertisements by Halloween. By the time Christmas arrives, we've had enough and are ready to pack it all up for another year. So when I say, "Let's extend the Christmas season to Epiphany," you may be tempted to shake your head and walk away.

Obviously, celebrating the twelve days of Christmas isn't exactly a new idea—we have all sung or heard the song by that name. Similarly, we've all probably heard sermons preached and poems recited that implore us to keep the spirit of Christmas alive in our hearts year round.

Can you remember receiving a gift that gave you so much joy that you were unable to express your thankfulness in words? a gift you've treasured more and more each day, a gift that may have been truly unexpected? Christmas has become a time of giving gifts—a way to express how we feel about the people in our lives. Gift giving is a way of showing love, and obviously, some gifts have no monetary value at all, as is true of the ultimate gift of Christmas, God's gift of eternal life through Christ.

I'm certainly not saying that we should leave our decorations on display for twelve more days, buy more gifts, and attend more parties—although

we may choose to do so. Nor am I trying to add more complications to our lives. Unless you vowed to make Christmas simpler and actually did it, this is probably a time when you need to sit back and relax. So what am I proposing?

I'm suggesting that, just as we might like to linger over a good meal, we also might benefit from taking time to savor the gifts that we've been given, both tangible and intangible. During this time of reflection we can name the gifts we've received this season—from friends, family, and God. What was expected? What was unexpected? How are the gifts we have received small incarnations of God's gift of Jesus to us?

What's new about this idea? Nothing, really. Look at the ideas for celebrating the twelve days of Christmas on the next two pages: Read the Scripture for each day, and try to imagine how each person felt about the unexpected gift he or she received. You may want to keep a journal of your thoughts for each day, recording not only the blessings but also the doubts and questions. Ask God. God can take your questions. Pray to be open to God's gifts. Expect to be amazed by the goodness of God, for God truly is good—all the time!

Sonia A. Albers is a writer and editor living in Roseville, Minn.

Celebrate the Twelve Days of CHRISTMAS

December 26

Acts 6:8–7:2a, 51–60

“The Son of God Goes Forth to War” (*Lutheran Book of Worship*, 183) or **“In All Our Grief”** (*With One Voice*, 739)

Give a gift of food to a local food pantry to commemorate Boxing Day, observed in Britain, New Zealand, Canada, and Australia, when gifts are given to charity, the poor, and people in service.

God, keep me mindful of the gift of your ever-present love. Amen

December 27

John 21:20–25

“O Master, Let Me Walk with You” (*LBW*, 492) or

“We Walk by Faith and Not by Sight” (*WOV*, 675)

Make or buy luminaria, a Mexican holiday tradition. Place one on each side of your driveway or another path to prepare for the coming of the Magi on Epiphany. Add more as the days pass. If you prefer, or if luminaria are not practical, set up a small altar of light and add a candle each day.

Thank you, eternal God, for surprising us with your light, shining through witnesses like John. Amen

December 28

Matthew 2:13–18

“O God of Every Nation” (*LBW*, 416) or

“Oh, Sleep Now, Holy Baby” (*WOV*, 639)

Position the Magi from your nativity scene across the room from the crèche to show that they have begun their journey but still have some distance to go. Add two luminaria to your driveway or path, or a candle to your altar.

God of all people, help me be a messenger of peace to the world. Amen

December 29

Luke 2:22–40

“At the Name of Jesus” (*LBW*, 179) or

“Now, Lord, You Let Your Servant Go in Peace” (*WOV*, 624, 625)

Add two more luminaria to your driveway or path, or a candle to your altar. Move the wise men closer to the crèche. How would Anna tell others about the child today (letters, email, phone calls, church announcements)? What would you include in such a message?

Ever-present God, open my eyes to the magnitude of your love. Amen

December 30

John 7:53–8:11

“I Lay My Sins on Jesus” (*LBW*, 305) or

“Go, My Children, with My Blessing” (*WOV*, 721)

Light a candle today and sit in quiet meditation as Jesus did when he went to the Mount of Olives to be renewed and refreshed.

Lord of Peace, keep me from being judgmental toward others. Remind me that prayer and meditation bring me closer to you and that you are my strength in all things. Amen

December 31

Ecclesiastes 3:1–13

“Earth and All Stars!” (*LBW*, 558) or

“When Long Before Time” (*WOV*, 799)

Add two more luminaria to your driveway or path, or a candle to your altar. Move the wise men closer to the crèche. Hang streamers to represent the fireworks that are part of the New Year’s Eve celebration in many countries.

God of work and play, help me to expect and find happiness in my daily work and play. Amen

January 1

Luke 2:15–21

What Child Is This" (LBW, 40) or
Way in a Manger" (WOV, 644)

Take some time to discuss or write about what you think the
shepherds saw and heard when they visited the manger.
Like peace doves, popular in Japan as a symbol of peace
at the new year.

*Gift of peace and love, your incarnation gives us hope. Fill our
hearts and lives with unexpected joy and excitement. Amen*

January 2

John 6:35–42, 48–51

Bread of Life from Heaven" (LBW, 222) or
I Am the Bread of Life" (WOV, 702)

Write the words of John 6:35–37 or 48–50 on a note card or sheet of
paper. Purchase or bake a loaf of bread or a muffin, attach the note,
and share both with a neighbor or friend.

*Bread of life, thank you for your wonderful and unexpected
gift of eternal life! Amen*

January 3

John 10:7–17

Leadeth Me: Oh, Blessed Thought!" (LBW, 501) or
You Satisfy the Hungry Heart" (WOV, 711)

To symbolize the unity of which Jesus spoke, make or buy a large
paper wreath to hang. Write "One Flock" at the top and then
write the names of family members, friends, and others on
strips of paper to be attached all over the wreath.

*Lord of all, help me to hear your voice and to be accepting
of all people, because all are a part of your flock. Amen*

January 4

John 14:6–14

You Are the Way" (LBW, 464) or
Jesus on the Mountain Peak" (WOV, 653)

Move the wise men closer to the crèche and add two more luminaria
to your driveway or path, or a candle to your altar. Think about or
discuss someone whom you know only from what someone else has
told you; compare that knowledge to knowing God through Jesus.

*God of all time and space, thank you for revealing yourself to
us through your Son, Jesus. Amen*

January 5

John 1:1–18

"Let All Together Praise Our God" (LBW, 47) or

"Word of God, Come Down on Earth" (WOV, 716)

Move the shepherds and sheep away from the crèche to make
way for the Magi and their camels. In anticipation of Three Kings
Day tomorrow, purchase some dried barley from a local florist's
shop (or draw pictures of barley). If you have small children,
have them do as the children in Spain do: Put barley in their
shoes and place the shoes by the doorway for the Magi's camels
that will be arriving tomorrow. Another option comes from Puerto
Rico, where children place grass in their shoes.

*Word of God, you came to us in human form. Help us to listen
to your message so that we may know God better. Amen*

January 6

Matthew 12:14–21

"Hail to the Lord's Anointed" (LBW, 87) or

"Arise, Your Light Has Come!" (WOV, 652)

If you put barley or grass in shoes the night before, replace it
with candies or other small treats to represent that the camels
have eaten the barley and the Magi have left gifts in gratitude.
Light all the luminaria or candles. Move the Magi and camels to
the crèche. To celebrate, serve Cake of the Kings, a traditional
Epiphany dessert in the Netherlands, Germany, England, and
other countries.

*God of light, we bow before you, humbled that you came to earth
to be with us. Shine always in our hearts and lives. Amen*



THE HOPE OF LOVE

P. K. McCary

For years, I jokingly referred to my desire for a grandchild as “my grandmother’s clock ticking.” So it was with great joy that I welcomed the news that my daughter-in-law Taniqua was pregnant with my first grandchild, child also of my firstborn son.

I WAS TOLD TO KEEP IT UNDER MY HAT, but I admit that I told my boss, who is also a friend. He had often regaled me with stories of his grandchildren, all of whom I had come to love and cherish too. Plus, because of his grandchildren and those of other friends, I just knew that I was going to make one heck of a grandmother when my time came.

So my joy was not lessened when I learned that my daughter-in-law would have to have surgery to make her pregnancy more secure. I went with her to the hospital and saw the fuzzy image of my first grandchild, which made it all the more real. God was going to make me a grandmother. Of that, I was certain.

Over the next few weeks, however, it became evident that this child was going to require more than average care. By the beginning of her fifth month, my daughter-in-law was bedridden, ordered to keep her feet elevated. I started collecting all the movies, music, books, and origami I could to keep her occupied, promising to sit with her and see her through this to the end.

The journey of pregnancy and childbirth is a wonderful experience for grandmothers. We relive our memories of our children being born, including the struggles with morning sickness and swollen ankles. We remember the wonder, too. I gave my

sweet daughter-in-law a few laughs about the birth of her husband—when he was being born, he just kept coming and coming, being almost 24 inches long. Through the laughter, we knew that this pregnancy would not be easy, but we were comforted that we were all in this together. Taniqua’s doctor, a devout Christian and wonderful obstetrician, didn’t waver in her belief that God was in charge, and as she too is a woman, she was a comfort to us all.

When Taniqua was 23 weeks along, my son called to say that it looked like this baby (who we had learned earlier was a girl) was going to be born. The call came as I was on my way with a minister friend to speak at a women’s breakfast, at least an hour away from the hospital. My first inclination was to turn the car around, but we started to pray. I heard in my heart that I should go on to the meeting and do what God would have me do, because “God has this,” as my children say. I promised my son that I would keep my cell phone on and that he should keep me informed.

Telling the stories of the women of the Bible has become a vocation for me. That day I was focusing on Eve, whom I consider the beginning story of our journey to Christ. Just as I stood to tell the story, my cell phone rang. It wasn’t loud, but it was loud enough. I saw Reverend Shannon grab the phone and carry it

out to the hallway. There was nothing for me to do but continue. I swallowed and prayed silently, “Help me tell this story, Lord. Please let everything be all right.”

I’m here to tell you that at the moment I made that plea, I was energized. I told them about an Eve who sinned, but an Eve who was allowed a glimpse of the future of forgiveness in her future children. I gave myself over to the wisdom of Scripture that God knows my name—and my granddaughter’s, daughter-in-law’s, and son’s names as well. I have to admit, I told a good story.

I didn’t even notice when Reverend Shannon returned, but as I ended the story of Eve, she stood up, went to the microphone, and called me to her. I knew that she would not tell me bad news in front of so many women, but I started crying anyway. And she said, “Perri, that was your daughter. She said for me to tell you to tell the best story you’ve ever told because you will be telling these stories to your beautiful granddaughter.”

Tears of joy filled the room as women joined me in celebration over the birth of my granddaughter, Melilla Ashanti Evans. The moment is etched forever in my heart. It was hard to sit through the rest of the morning, but I’m glad I did. One woman came over and whispered that her twin grandsons were born almost three months premature and that they were now three years old, getting into things, and the joy of her life. Another pointed out that her now-grown daughter was born two months early and pointed her out to me. Believe me, hope does not disappoint.

Finally I went to the hospital and was introduced to my granddaughter. Though she was small beyond belief, I still saw her daddy in her long feet and hands. I knew that she would wrap that big strong

man around her little finger. Later that night I started writing to Melilla. I welcomed her into the world the only way I could. If I couldn’t hold her in my arms, I would hold her in my heart and keep a record of every beep and squeal of the machines, every nurse, doctor, and family member who walked through the door to see her. I would tell her how we got through it all, and then, when she was older, I would read those words to her so that she could see just how loved she was from the beginning.

She was born on a Saturday morning. The next Saturday, she was gone.

It is not the natural order of things to bury a grandchild. In fact, God promises us that there will be a time when infants don’t die. It isn’t today. But there is grace, and because of God’s grace, I grieve, but not as one without hope.

Later that night I started
writing to Melilla.
I welcomed her into the
world the only way I could.

The women of this church have richly blessed me. All around the country, as I’ve walked this walk and talked this talk, the women of this church have welcomed me, cherished me, comforted

me. They were there with joy and thanksgiving when Melilla was born. They did not fail me when she died.

I won’t say that I wasn’t utterly destroyed when I walked through the door to the hospital nursery and saw the nurses putting up her little bed. A part of me is still in that room. Later, as I walked into the room where my son and daughter-in-law held my precious grandbaby for the first and last time, I felt helpless. All I could say was I was sorry. When my son placed that precious child in my arms, she felt so good to me. I begged for another moment. I wanted it all to be a bad dream.

I stumbled through the rest of the day. I tried to sleep, but sleep would not come. I wrote my last letter to my granddaughter, a letter of farewell. I told her

that we had tried, but that we had to let her go even though it was hard. I promised her that she would meet those who had gone before her, a few greats and great-greats, who would tell the stories I never got to tell her. I promised her that I would see her again one day.

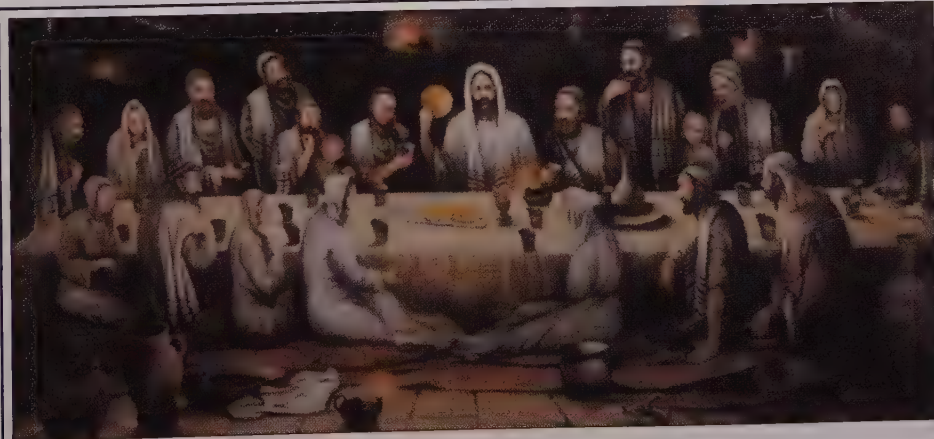
How do I get through it all? Friends and family, of course. My pastor said it best: "God could have said 'no' right off the bat, but God said, 'yes!'" God said "yes" to Melilla being on this earth, "yes" to my son and daughter-in-law being parents, "yes" to my being a grandmother. And God is saying to us "go on" as well. I've been thinking about the formula for getting through disasters, and the truth is that the only formula is Jesus Christ. My faith is in the Christ, not just in the promise of life everlasting, but in his comfort in our despair, our doubts, our pain. I believe and know that the Christ lives through us and sustains us.

My friends and colleagues have been a tremendous blessing to me. I asked that no one send flowers but rather send seeds to plant in a garden for my granddaughter. I never expected it to catch on, but we've got seeds of babies' breath, morning glories, and a host of other flowers that God has made. Oh, and the prayers. Prayers work, let me tell you.

The day after my granddaughter died, I had to speak at another church. When I walked in, someone who hadn't heard the news asked about my granddaughter. For a moment, I faltered, thinking, "I can't do this." But in that instant, there they were—women and men of faith, there to steady me.

That day I told of a God who will get us through anything, including the death of a grandchild. I told them that I am able to stand and still tell of the goodness of God, because although I don't understand everything, I do understand this: God loves us. God loves me, and God loves Melilla. The tragedies of this world happen and will continue to happen until Jesus comes again, but God's mercy endures forever. I'm also comforted that one day I will see my darling Melilla again and that she will remember when I sat by her bed and sang, "Great Is God's Faithfulness." And on that day, she will tell me that I was right in singing that song, and then she'll welcome me home. Amen.

P. K. McCary is an author, peace activist, and storyteller who attends Lamb of God Lutheran Church in Houston, Texas. She is also the mother of three wonderful children and one precious daughter-in-law.



The Last Supper

by Bohdan Piasecki (1998)

depicts women and children—*This painting shows the Last Supper as a Jewish Passover celebration in Jerusalem in 33 A.D.*

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READER CALL

IN EFFORTS TO BE ALL-EMBRACING, HAVE YOU CELEBRATED OTHER TRADITIONS AT CHRISTMAS OR ON OTHER HOLIDAYS?

My husband is originally from Iran. Every March 21, we celebrate a holiday tradition from his culture: the Persian New Year, or *Nourouz*. This celebration traditionally lasts almost two weeks and welcomes spring or the new year. Part of the tradition is a *Nourouz* table, set with the seven S's: silver coins (*sekke*) for prosperity, garlic (*seer*) for health, sumac for good taste, apple (*seeb*) for nutrition, vinegar (*serke*) for cleanliness, *samanu* (similar to pie filling) as a food supplement, and grass (*sabzi*) grown in a pie plate from wheat or lentils to put on the table for freshness. Flowering bulbs such as tulips or hyacinths are also put on the table for beauty. Hard-boiled eggs (colored like Easter eggs) are a symbol of fertility and nutrition. I use a white tablecloth hand-embroidered with fruits and vegetables for our *Nourouz* table.

Traditionally, on the first night of the holiday, people go from house to house to wish family and friends a happy new year. Celebration, singing, and dancing continue during every day of the *Nourouz* period. On the last day of the holiday (the 13th day), everyone has the day off work. A big picnic with live music is held. Rice, fish, and kabob are made over fires, and everyone celebrates the beginning of spring and the new year. The grass grown from wheat or lentils is thrown into a large body of water, like a lake, to symbolize the cycle of nature.

Because my husband and I live in Minnesota, far from his relatives, we have taken to inviting friends and my family to celebrate the first night of *Nourouz*

with us. It is a beautiful way for us to welcome spring in the snowiest month of Minnesota winter!

Julie Parvis—Chaska, Minn.

My husband, Will, and I moved to Othello, Washington, shortly after we were married in 1961. We immediately discovered other ethnic, social, and cultural groups. Both of us had been born and raised in central North Dakota among people who were mainly immigrant Norwegians, Germans, and Russians. We were accustomed to seeing people who looked like us, with fair skin, blue eyes, and blonde or fair hair. Our new neighbors had much darker skin, beautiful brown eyes, and dark hair. They accepted us, and we accepted them.

To supplement his teaching salary, my husband worked a few hours a week at a variety store. One of his co-workers was Latina, and they became friends. The week before Christmas in 1967 she invited our family to share her family's traditional Christmas Eve dinner. The main food item, she said, would be tamales. We learned that tamales are to Latinos what *lefse* and lutefisk are to Norwegians at Christmas. A lot of hard work and love go into the preparation.

We ate early on Christmas Eve so that everyone could attend worship services. Thirty-five years later, Will and I still remember that lovely Christmas Eve when we sat down with new Christian friends to share a meal and tradition totally new to us.

Fay Coats—Othello, Wash.

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MEGHAN JOHNSTON

Incoming M.Div. at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago



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Session 4

Grace upon Grace



by Mary Hinkle

Study Texts

John 1:1–18; Genesis 1:1–5

Theme Verse

“From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.” (John 1:16)

Overview

Every Christmas, we celebrate the gift of the Word made flesh. John begins his Gospel by speaking of the Word who was present with God at the very beginning of creation. That eternal Word, John announces, has become a human being in the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Eventually, the church would hear in the prologue to John’s Gospel (John 1:1–18) a testimony that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. He is one with the Father and at the same time fully a flesh-and-blood human being. In this session, we study the opening verses of John’s Gospel. We will read closely the poetry of these lines of Scripture and consider how Jesus has made God known to us.

Opening

Word of God, come down on earth,
living rain from heav’n descending;
touch our hearts and bring to birth
faith and hope and love unending.
Word almighty, we revere you;
Word made flesh, we long to hear you.

Word eternal, throned on high,
Word that brought to life creation,
Word that came from heav’n to die,
crucified for our salvation,
saving Word, the world restoring,
speak to us, your love outpouring.

(“Word of God, Come Down on Earth,” stanzas 1 & 2, *With One Voice*, 716)

In the Beginning Was the Word

1. Are there stories your family has handed down to you about your birth or adoption or about how you got your name? If so, share one of those stories.

Stories about our beginnings may help bring into focus other events in our lives. All the Gospel writers except Mark tell us something about Jesus' beginnings. Matthew starts his Gospel with a genealogy that traces Jesus' lineage back to Abraham and links Jesus with the promises God made to Abraham. Luke tells the story of the angel Gabriel coming to Mary and announcing to her the surprising news that she will have a child.

John, too, begins his Gospel with a story set in time before Jesus was born. In fact, John begins as far back in time as it is possible to go, back to "the beginning," that is, to the time before creation itself.

2. Read Genesis 1:1–5. Read John 1:1–5. What similarities do you notice between the two readings? In the chart below, fill in the references to words that appear in both readings. Sometimes these words are identical in the two passages. Sometimes they are not identical but related.

Idea shared by Genesis 1 and John 1	Words in Genesis 1:1–5	Words in John 1:1–5
Beginning		
Creation		
Speaking/word		
Light		
Darkness		

John identifies Jesus as the Word through whom all creation came into being. Jesus refers to himself in a similar way when he says, "So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed" (John 17:5; see also John 17:24). There is no "division of labor" within the Holy Trinity here, with one member responsible for one task (making all things), while another steps in to complete a different task (redeeming all things). Instead, the Son shares in the work of creation, just as the Father shares in the work of redemption.

Go Deeper

In John's description of the pre-existent Word of God, some readers hear an echo of Wisdom, as Wisdom is personified in Proverbs. Read Proverbs 8:22–31, and compare it to John 1:1–5. What do these two portraits have in common? How are they different from each other?

The Word Became Flesh

Read John 1:9–14. In Jesus' time, students of the Jewish Scriptures would have understood the concept of God creating all things by means of God's word. According to Genesis, God spoke, and the world came into being. Students of Greek philosophy also would have found much to agree with in the opening lines of John's Gospel. To those familiar with the philosophy of the Stoics, it would make sense that the Word, or the principle of divine reason (*logos* in Greek, related to our word *logic*), had played a role in the creation of the world. The first point of John's prologue—that the Word was the agent by which creation came into being—would make sense to both Jews and Greeks.

The second point of the Gospel's prologue would be harder for an ancient audience to understand. The Word became *flesh*? To Jews, one would risk idolatry to identify the sovereign God, creator of heaven and earth, with a sole human being. Israel knew, of course, that God worked *through* human beings: God spoke through the prophets; God ruled Israel through its kings; God cared for widows and orphans through the kindness that God's people showed. Sometimes God even used foreigners—Gentiles!—to accomplish God's purposes. Yet to identify God with one frail human being was to risk making God altogether too small.

Nor did Greek philosophy, for its part, have an analogy to the news that the principle by which the world was structured, the divine principle of reason, would be identified with a flesh-and-blood human being. The Greeks had stories of gods inhabiting human or animal bodies for a time, but they had no story of the *logos*, the Word, becoming identified with a human being.

3. **In these texts from the Gospel of John, Jesus experiences things that are usually more closely associated with being human than with being divine. What are those things?**

John 4:6

John 4:7

John 11:33

John 11:35

John 19:30

4. **Christians confess that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human. What does this confession mean to you? Which (if either) of these two is more of a challenge for you: to think of Jesus as fully divine, or to think of Jesus as fully human?**

John's Testimony to the Word

Into the sublime poetry of the prologue, John the evangelist has inserted two references to John the Baptist. **Read John 1:6–8, 15.** These references have the effect of bringing the events described in the prologue down to earth, as it were, situating them in that particular time and place where John is baptizing and bearing witness to one who is greater than he.

5. **How does the prologue describe John the Baptist's work?**

Go Deeper

Although John the Baptist is never shown baptizing in the Gospel of John, he does announce Jesus to others. For more on John's testimony about Jesus, read John 1:29–30, 35–37. In this Gospel, Jesus is crucified at the hour when the lambs are being slaughtered for the Passover meal. In session 8 of this study, we will talk more about the timing of Jesus' death and its significance for our understanding of him. For now, notice the particular title that John has for Jesus. When John sees Jesus, what does John call him (see 1:29, 36)?

The Word Makes God Known

Read John 1:16–18. Jesus makes God known (verse 18). In John's Gospel, Jesus makes God known in at least two different ways.

NAMING THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Who wrote the Gospel of John? The Gospel itself does not say.

Some New Testament writers identify themselves within the text of their writing. For instance, the apostle Paul does this when writing letters, and John does the same when writing Revelation (Revelation 1:1). Yet none of the Gospel writers identifies himself within the text of a Gospel. The names by which we know the Gospels came to be associated with these texts some years after they were written.

Modern scholars have questioned to what extent an apostle was responsible for the Fourth Gospel as we have it now. Among the reasons for skepticism is the fact that at points the author speaks as though he were not an eyewitness. See, for example, John 21:24, where the second half of the verse says that "we know" the disciple's testimony is true. Who are the "we" who know something? Is the author speaking? Is a later editor speaking? We cannot be sure. No one identifies himself.

Even so, the Fourth Gospel has been traditionally associated with John the apostle, who is identified in the Gospels as the son of Zebedee and the brother of James. He was one of Jesus' disciples. In the Fourth Gospel itself, John is mentioned only once (21:2). The most vivid stories we have of him are from Mark, Matthew, and Luke. See, for example, Mark 1:19-20; 10:35-45. John the apostle is not the same person as John the Baptist, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth (see Luke 1:57-66).

The church has also associated the Fourth Gospel with "the beloved disciple," or "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (see John 13:23; 19:26-27; 20:1-10; 21:7, 20-24), in part because this is the only Gospel that refers to a disciple in this way. Was John the one known as the beloved disciple? Was it someone else? We simply do not know. Just as the Gospel never identifies its author, so also it never connects a name to the beloved disciple.

First, Jesus performs signs of God's glory, such as when he changes water to wine or gives sight to a man born blind. Witnesses to these signs are not always sure what to believe about them or about the one who performs them.

Some people in the Gospel recognize the power of God in what Jesus is doing. They ask themselves whether he might be someone sent from God (John 3:1-2) or even the Messiah (7:31). Other people are confused or angered by the signs (7:32). Whether people respond to the signs by believing or by rejecting Jesus, the signs in the Gospel are one of the ways that Jesus makes God known.

A second way that Jesus makes God known is by speaking of himself and his relationship to God. Especially important in this regard are the "I am" statements of Jesus. Sometimes the "I am" has no predicate, such as when Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58). In cases like this, Jesus seems to be echoing God's own self-designation to Moses: "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:14). At other times, the "I am" statement has a predicate that sheds new light on God and God's relationship to humanity, as when Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd," or "I am the true vine." (We will look closely at the "I am" statements in the next session.)

THE LIGHT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS

John 1:5 is a word filled with hope and promise. As the NRSV translates it, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Just as a candle or a flashlight beam can change the character of a dark room, scattering the darkness, so the light of Christ shines in our lives and our world, dimmed and diminished by

sin. Here, in the prologue to the Gospel that unfolds the story of Jesus' crucifixion and death, John assures us from the start that no matter how firmly and frighteningly the darkness will appear to be closing in on the light, still, "the darkness did not overcome it."

The NIV favors a different but equally valid sense of

the Greek text: "The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it." The darkness could not grasp the light. As the rest of the Gospel story will show, Jesus and his message confound many of his hearers. They will leave shaking their heads, having no idea what Jesus is really trying to say to them. Nicodemus, for example, is drawn to Jesus, the light of

the world, yet finds him incomprehensible.

Both translations get at realities that the rest of the Gospel will unfold for us. The darkness failed also to comprehend the light or understand it. Yet even that misunderstanding was finally not the last word: The darkness, powerful and uncomprehending as it was, failed to apprehend the light or overcome it.

6. **"From his fullness," John says, "we have all received, grace upon grace" (verse 16). Christians often use the word *grace* without defining it. If you were trying to explain grace to someone who was not a Christian, where would you begin? How would you describe the "grace upon grace" that we have received from Jesus? If you are completing this study in a group, work on this question together.**

The Word Gives Power to Become Children of God

New Testament scholar R. Alan Culpepper has proposed that the prologue's phrases form concentric circles around its middle phrase, "children of God." The prologue is arranged here to illustrate this structure of phrases, like ripples from a stone tossed in a pond, radiating out from the phrase in verse 12. In Culpepper's arrangement of the prologue, these words describe Jesus' central gift: "to all who received

him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God" (John 1:12).

(see diagram, opposite)

Sometimes language about being God's children can seem to diminish people, as if we were never permitted to grow up or demonstrate our gifts and strengths. Yet such language also points to a relationship that is both primary and permanent. We are always the children of our parents; if we are God's children, we will always have a connection to God.

7. **Do you think of yourself as a child of God? If so, what does that way of speaking mean to you? If not, what would it be like to imagine yourself that way? Is this an image that empowers you in your Christian identity and witness, or is it stifling?**

THE WORD AND GOD

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God.

THE WORD AND CREATION

³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being

⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

THE WORD AND JOHN

⁶ There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

THE WORD AND THE WORLD

⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.

¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

¹² But to all who received him,

he gave power to become children of God,

--who believed in his name,

¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

THE WORD AND THE COMMUNITY

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'")

¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

The Word with God

What came through the Word

What was received from the Word

John announces the Word

The Word enters the world

The Word and his own people

The Word is accepted

The Word's gift to those who accepted him

FATHER AND SON

One of the themes of the prologue is the unique relationship that the Incarnate Word has with God: "the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Both were the agents through which all things were made. And now, in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God has revealed to humanity the God whom no one has ever seen (1:18).

How might such a close connection be described? What language works to name the reality of two who are intimately related

yet distinct from each other? The Gospel of John consistently uses Father and Son language to describe the relationship of God and Jesus. All of the Gospels record that Jesus calls God "Father," but this language of familial relationship occurs more often in the Fourth Gospel than in the other three Gospels combined. In nearly every chapter of John's Gospel, references to Father and Son appear. The Father sends the Son; the Son reveals the Father's glory, and so on. Before his death, Jesus says to the disciples, "As the Father has loved me, so I have

loved you" (John 15:9), and after his resurrection, Jesus says to them, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you" (20:21). The disciples are drawn into this relationship and become, as promised in the prologue, "children of God."

In the past 25 years, we have become newly aware of limitations in our language. Even language like "Father" and "Son," which is important in the biblical witness, is limited in its capacity to communicate the reality of God. The words can remind us of strained or difficult relationships between human

fathers and their children, or they can lead us to the false conclusion that there is something about God that men emulate more closely than women do. When this happens, we may be unwittingly imagining a God who is nothing like the God described by the biblical witness. As problematic as these images can be for us, it may help to remember that talk of "Father" and "Son" is the language of relationship. It means to communicate the positive reality of God's care for humanity and God's desire to relate to us.

Closing

Read John 1:1–18 aloud. If multiple readers are available, consider using different voices for the reading, as outlined in the Leader Guide.

Sing or say stanza 1 of "I Want to Walk as a Child of the Light" (*With One Voice*, 649).

I want to walk as a child of the light.
I want to follow Jesus.
God set the stars to give light to the world.
The star of my life is Jesus.
In him there is no darkness at all.
The night and the day are both alike.

The Lamb is the light of the city of God.
Shine in my heart, Lord Jesus.

Looking Ahead

Many times in the Gospel of John, Jesus refers to himself with the words "I am." Next month we will look at the images Jesus describes himself with when he says, "I am. . . ." Jesus calls himself bread, light, gate, shepherd, resurrection, way, truth, life, and vine. What do these images mean for our understanding of Jesus? And how do they help to give shape and substance to the lives of those who believe in him? Our next session will take up these questions.

WELCOMING THE CHILDREN

Concern for the Most Vulnerable

by Elizabeth Senft

At Christmastime, we are reminded that the Christ child was forced to flee with his parents to Egypt for fear of Herod.

He fled with parents who protected him. But what if his parents had died and he still needed to flee as a young child? What if he had been separated from his parents at the temple when he was 12, during one of the frequent periods of civil unrest in that part of the world at that time, and had been unable to reunite with them?

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service is motivated by God's love in Christ to welcome the stranger. As the U.S. Lutheran expression for the concerns of refugees and migrants, LIRS resettles refugees; provides services to immigrants, detainees, and asylum seekers; and has long been a recognized leader in providing care for refugee and immigrant children.

This Christmas, immigrant children suffer and endure in a world that is now afraid of strangers. Before that day in September 2001, things were hard, but since then, they have become harder and even more uncertain. In 2002, it is estimated that the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) will detain more than 4,500 unaccompanied children,



Mekabou Fofana, on his 18th birthday. He received asylum shortly before this picture was taken after two years in detention in six different jails. He is with Dubravka Mujagic, who is a former Bosnian refugee.

the youngest of whom might be younger than two. These children have often fled horrendous persecution in search of safety in the United States, only to be immediately placed behind bars without legal assistance. They are often placed in solitary confinement, handcuffed, and strip-searched. Most do not have legal counsel to represent them, and there is no guardian system to look after their needs. Children are the world's most precious resource, and yet the United States, which prides itself on its humane treatment of children, puts foreign children in jail, often intermingled with juvenile and even adult offenders.

At the time of this writing, the place of children in the reorganization of INS and Homeland Security is uncertain. The Children's Bill (S.121), written to protect children from the practices described above, is now incorporated within S.2444, titled the Immigration Reform, Accountability, and Security Enhancement Act of 2002.

The bill and its alternatives seek to respond to the situation of the thousands of children without adult caregivers found here each year by the INS. But the current practice is neither the most secure nor even the most economical way to treat these children.



Edwin Munoz after his testimony in the Senate, with Merritt Becker of the LIRS advocacy office.

Incarceration at the center in Berks County, Pennsylvania, for example, costs \$168 per day plus a \$35 education fee on school days. Foster care, which would place a child in a much more stable, less fearful, and more appropriate environment, typically

costs \$50 per day, a savings of over 75 percent. The Children's Bill and its alternatives would ensure that a child be held only for 72 hours and then placed in foster care or a shelter. At this time, there are children who have been detained in various secure facilities for two years and more.

Edwin Munoz, who told his story at a Senate hearing, described his experience as an alien child in detention. He came to this country with hope for a new life. His father was dead, his mother had abandoned him, his supposed caretakers abused him, and he had heard that his government killed homeless children. So he walked and hitchhiked across Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico. He worked for food and slept where he could. INS officers arrested him as he tried to cross into California. After spending time at several detention facilities (it is not unusual for these children to be transferred six or eight times), he ended up in a San Diego juvenile facility. In his testimony before the Senate Subcommittee on Immigration, he described how he spent many hours of each day in a cell with criminals. The authorities beat him. The committee and observers reacted emotionally to Edwin's story, but unfortunately his is not an unusual

story or even among the worst. It just happens to be one that is more public.

The Children's Bill and its alternatives could easily get lost during the INS reorganization and amid concerns for domestic security. It is important for those who care about the welfare of these children to continue to write and advocate for their concerns and for the creation of an Office of Immigrant Children's Services.

In our faith, children are precious, the most perfect examples of hope and God's love. Children are our future, individually and collectively. God sent Jesus, his son and our savior, as a child. Why, then, do we as Christians permit children who are fleeing injustice, persecution, starvation, and death to be put in jail? There is something very wrong about putting a child in shackles, behind bars, without representation, when this child has come seeking safety.

Jesus, who came to this earth as a child, and who was a refugee, commands us, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" and "Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven" (Matthew 18). Children are a precious gift of God. Let us care for them.

For the status of legislation concerning refugee and immigrant children, for more information about the work of LIRS with these children, and for ways you can help and give to this work, check the LIRS web site (www.lirs.org). For further opportunities to serve and to give to this ministry, contact

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service
700 Light Street
Baltimore, MD 21230
410-230-2700

Elizabeth Senft is an ELCA pastor who has worked with refugees.

COACH, ADVISOR, FRIEND

What a difference a mentor can make. We've all probably had someone in our lives who served as a role model, bolstered our self-esteem, pointed us in the right direction, brought out our spiritual gifts, and was just there when we needed her. For women who have suffered homelessness and other serious crises in their lives and are without a personal support network, having a caring mentor is especially important and can be a life-changing experience.

project lifeline

Joanne,* a mother with two young children, knows firsthand what it means to have a mentor. She moved from a domestic violence shelter into a transitional housing program sponsored by Women in Need Growing Stronger (WINGS), an agency in the Chicago suburbs that assists homeless women as they work to achieve a better life. Her obstacles were many—an abusive husband, no job, little vocational training, and payments on the family car she had taken with her when she left her husband. Joanne had family in the area, but no one she could turn to for housing or monetary support. Her relationship with her mother was strained, and although she and her sister communicated from time to time, her sister couldn't take her in or provide the support she needed.

Then someone at WINGS directed her toward Project Lifeline, a program that links women in transitional housing with mentors recruited from local congregations. Funded in part by grants from Women of the ELCA and the ELCA, this program is a collaborative effort between WINGS and the Metro Chicago Synodical Women's Organization. After receiving special training, these mentors offer

one-to-one support and encouragement to women as they move toward economic self-sufficiency.

mentoring is a partnership

For Joanne, her mentor has been someone who stands at her side as she navigates the maze of legal, financial, and personal difficulties she faces—finding high-quality subsidized child care, initiating divorce proceedings, paying bills that had accumulated, and beginning a budget and savings plan. Her mentor is a sounding board, a friend who listens, someone on whom she can lean when she gets discouraged.

"I have gained a coach, an advisor, a friend," says Joanne. "We have covered a lot of territory in a short time. We work together to come up with solutions. It is so nice to finally have someone in my corner, with no strings attached. I've never really had that before. It's been a wonderful, gratifying journey, and I look forward to every moment."

For many of the "mentees" involved in Project Lifeline, according to Marcie Smith, the Project Lifeline coordinator, the relationship with a mentor has allowed them to begin to trust other people again. The mentees learn that they can share their life stories

* Names of program participants have been changed.

with their mentors and still be affirmed. Marcie is pleased with the impact of the mentoring program. "I have seen increased self-esteem in the women, which has allowed them to make some major changes in their lives. It is wonderful to see women who are excited about being able to share with someone else when something good happens in their lives, even if it is just a little thing."

mentors also benefit

And what about the mentors? Does the relationship benefit them too? Have they learned something as well? Mentor Sherry thinks it is a win-win situation. "The mentee wins because there is someone close who is rooting for her. She can learn from her mentor's successes and, more important, from her mentor's failures. The mentor wins by sharing her own life experiences and by giving something back to the mentee. Coaching women who have to work so hard every day to make it makes me really feel appreciation for what I have."

Coordinator Smith agrees. "I think the one common element I hear from the mentors is that by listening to their mentees and the struggles they face,

the mentors get a different perspective on their own lives. They all really want their partners to succeed in life in whatever path they have chosen. The mentors have also learned that you cannot push your own values on others. It is really up to the mentee to change her own life."

a good mentor

What are the most important qualities for a mentor? According to Smith, a good mentor is adaptable and open-minded, able to put aside any preconceived notions about "saving" her mentee, respectful and nonjudgmental, and prepared to be there along the way. As Joanne notes, "Even though I have a long way to go, the journey ahead does not seem so long, because I have someone by my side."

For more information about Project Lifeline, contact Marcie Smith at WINGS, 887 E. Wilmette Road, Suite E-2, Palatine, IL 60074.

To support other innovative programs that make a difference in women's lives, send a contribution to Women of the ELCA Grants Program, 8765 W. Higgins Road, Chicago, IL 60631.

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With God, All Things Are Possible

by Linda Post Bushkofsky

WE KNOW THE FAMILIAR STORY. WE'VE HEARD IT SO MANY TIMES. GOD SENDS GABRIEL TO MARY, A POOR TEENAGER. GABRIEL TELLS MARY THAT SHE IS FAVORED AND THAT GOD IS WITH HER. WITH WORDS OF ASSURANCE GABRIEL TELLS HER OF GOD'S PLAN—that she will bear a son, Jesus, the Son of God. Mary learns too that Elizabeth, in her old age, is also expecting a child, “for nothing will be impossible with God.”

Mary, a poor unwed teenager, was surely scared and overwhelmed by Gabriel's news. Could she have truly envisioned the future God had planned for her and her child? Yet assured by the word of God, Mary responds with a most magnificent song, a song that speaks of God's love and promise, God's peace and justice.

Then there's Joseph. He learns that the young woman to whom he is betrothed is with child. According to the custom of his time, Joseph could have easily walked away from this betrothal. God, however, has other plans. God sends an angel to Joseph who, with words of assurance, tells Joseph of Mary's calling to be the mother of God.

Joseph must have been scared and overwhelmed, too. In following the angel's command, Joseph goes against custom and tradition. Surely it is embarrassing for Joseph, his parents, his friends. Could he have truly envisioned the future God had planned for him and Mary, for Jesus?

Despite logic, custom, and tradition, Mary and Joseph listen to and follow God's word. They accept God's invitation. They choose to say “yes.”

God invites us too. God calls us to give birth to the holy in our lives. That's the focus of the current Triennium (2002–2005) in which we are living. No one knows what lies ahead when we say yes to God! We too may be called to give birth to the holy in a way that defies logic, custom, and tradition. In choosing to say “yes” to God, we proceed with God's assurances and the promise that “nothing will be impossible with God.”

LITANY FOR A WAITING PEOPLE

God our creator, come and teach us to give birth to the holy in our lives. We pray:

For nothing is impossible with God.

Loving God, open our hearts that we, like Mary and Joseph, might hear your call and respond “yes.” We pray:

For nothing is impossible with God.

Reassuring God, when we are scared and overwhelmed, provide us with strength and courage to follow your call despite logic and custom and tradition. We pray:

For nothing is impossible with God.

Hear our prayers, O God of steadfast love, as we watch and wait for the promised day of our redemption; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director, Women of the ELCA.



A M E N !

Miracles in Everyday Forms

by Catherine Malotky

GOD OF WINTER, AT THIS TIME OF YEAR IN NORTHERN REACHES, THE EARTH IS DORMANT. IT IS THE SEASON OF STILLNESS. NEXT MONTH, THE GREAT HORNED OWLS WILL BEGIN TO SEARCH FOR MATES AND START THEIR BROODS, BUT NOW, WHEN THE DAYS ARE SHORT and the darkness comes early and stays late, little gives promise of new life. If the earth is not shrouded with snow and cold, it is brown and somber. Leaves have fallen. Much is at rest.

Winter is also a season of miracles, perhaps because the earth is so still. At this time of year, miracles come in everyday forms—meals, outings, stories, gatherings, gestures of generosity, hope.

Much around us would distract us from the reality of this season. We hardly ever rest as the earth is doing. In an effort to make the season come, we can crowd out the miracles with lists of things to do and see. We may try to make everyday things extraordinary—the best Christmas dinner, a superbly decorated home, the perfect gift, the finest party or concert.

God, you call us to live deeply into this season, to breathe and wait and look and listen. You bid us let the season unfold, rather than forcing it. You present us with the story and the promise and invite us to let them wash over us.

Of course, we will decorate and prepare dinner and go to worship and sing the songs we love. But you also invite us to the stable, to hear Mary groaning in labor. You invite us to listen to our own labor for life. You watch over us in those places of grief and sadness where we struggle to find meaning and wholeness for ourselves and for the whole creation.

When the pain of labor is over, when the birth is finally come, at the oh-so-sacred moment when we welcome the newborn into our arms, you rejoice with us.

Though you rejoice with us throughout the year, for all the ways we give birth in our lives, we feel it especially in this season. When we give birth to hope, to generosity of spirit, to gratitude, to a hunger for justice, to a knack for mercy, then we give birth to the Christ in us.

God, be with us in the weeks ahead. Be our quiet place, so we might see and hear and taste you with us, bringing life out of all the deaths we have endured and will endure. Weave both our sorrows and our joys into the fabric of this season, so that we celebrate every day the coming of the Word, Jesus.

God, you call
us to live deeply
into this season,
to breathe and
wait and look
and listen.

Catherine Malotky serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as representative for Region 3 (North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota). An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.

READER CALL TOPICS AND DEADLINES

Mail or email to *LWT* Editorial Office

May 2003

Let us know what tops your prayer list.

Due January 10, 2003

June 2003

What biblical figure would be your "leading lady," and why?

Due February 10, 2003

July/August 2003

Briefly describe what has been your favorite age, and why.

Due March 10, 2003

IDEANET TOPICS AND DEADLINES

Use the enclosed card or email IdeaNet@elca.org

May 2003

How do you incorporate multicultural education and traditions in your congregation? Share with us your efforts to be welcoming and inclusive to all members of your community.

Due January 10, 2003

June 2003

Does your group exercise together when you meet? Does your circle do yoga after Bible study? How does your group or congregation collectively appreciate or thank the Lord for the gift of health?

Due February 10, 2003

July/August 2003

How does your group or congregation work to involve the older or homebound members of the congregation?

Due March 10, 2002

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It came upon the midnight clear,
That glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth
To touch their harps of gold:
"Peace on the earth, good will to all,
From heav'n's all-gracious king."
The world in solemn stillness lay
To hear the angels sing.

And you, beneath life's crushing load,
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow:
Look now, for glad and golden hours
Come swiftly on the wing;
Oh, rest beside the weary road
And hear the angels sing!

"It Came upon the Midnight Clear"
LBW, 54

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